



Watauga County Sheriff's Office

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Mark Shook, Sheriff



Methamphetamine was something we heard about but believed it was a far away problem; a California problem. In the spring of 2002 our 312 square mile semi-rural Western North Carolina County with a population of 48,000 full time residents was seriously impacted by the scourge of methamphetamine. We were not prepared.

I am the Sheriff of Watauga County North Carolina. I have been a professional law enforcement officer for nearly 20 years. In this time I have worked in many facets of local law enforcement. I have been a patrol officer, a detective and now Sheriff. During my years of service I have investigated murders, rapes, property crimes and even automobile crashes. Each of these significantly affect the people involved. The effect I've seen on our County from methamphetamine is not localized like these other crimes. Methamphetamine impacts in some way everyone around it.

Methamphetamine has penetrated our communities like the disease that it is.

It is our families that are hardest hit. Methamphetamine addicts do not hold jobs; they do not contribute to our society. **These individuals are users, plain and simple.** They use our community's resources; they steal from their family members. They break into their neighbors houses. They become physically aggressive to those around them, often to people they love; even their children. Finally, they rob and kill because of perceived needs and paranoia.

So many times we have seen first hand the hardest hit victims are the defenseless; the young children who are forced to live in conditions that are appalling by any standard. Time and again we've raided active clandestine methamphetamine laboratories and found children living in these contaminated structures. We've seen baby bottles soaking in a sink full of chemical waste from methamphetamine production. I have taken teenagers from their parents' methamphetamine lab and found coffee filters with wet methamphetamine in their pockets; fresh from a methamphetamine "cook." I spoke with a 6 year old boy who lived with his mother and father in a methamphetamine laboratory. This six-year-old told me step by step the process his mom and dad used to manufacture methamphetamine; **step by step.** This child's parents had used him many times to assist them in cooking methamphetamine.

In January of this year two small children were abducted at gunpoint from a foster home in Watauga County by their biological parents. The children were in protective custody because their parents were operating a methamphetamine laboratory in their house. These methamphetamine addicts found out where their children were housed, got a pistol, drove there and held the foster family at gunpoint while they took the children. Four days, an Amber Alert, and one car chase later we recovered the children, thankfully unharmed, in our neighboring state of Virginia. The parents were immediately arrested



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and searched. Again, they were carrying methamphetamine. The children are now back in foster care and the parents are in jail awaiting trial on kidnapping, armed robbery, and methamphetamine manufacturing charges.

In our small County we have had methamphetamine related homicides, robberies, and sex offenses. In a county where murders are few and far-between, most of the murders that have occurred in our county recently have had various ties to methamphetamine. Houses, mobile homes and apartments have burned due to the flammability and toxicity of the chemical mixtures people use while trying to manufacture methamphetamine. Many of these amateur methamphetamine cooks have been badly burned while trying to cook methamphetamine.

Clandestine methamphetamine laboratories represent the single greatest threat to the safety of emergency responders in our county. I have officers in my department that have been injured investigating meth labs. Six volunteer firefighters from one department in our County have been injured, one seriously and permanently while working to extinguish meth lab related fires. These injuries are not from the fire itself, nor a fall; these injuries are from the toxic fumes produced by the methamphetamine cooking process. We have been lucky in Watauga County, North Carolina. None of our responders have been killed, but around the country firefighters, medics, law enforcement officers, and many others in the public safety/public service industry are seriously injured or killed every year from on the job exposure to these clandestine laboratories.

I was elected Sheriff in 2002. Before my election I was a detective at the Sheriff's Office. In the year before I took office I noticed a trend developing in cases I was investigating. I kept hearing the word "Meth." I was vaguely aware of methamphetamine from training and word of mouth but I really didn't know much about it. What I did know was that "meth" was being identified with more and more criminal activity. A murder I worked earlier in the year turned out to be a meth lab dispute, suspects in sexual assault cases were citing methamphetamine as a contributing factor in their behavior. I came to understand that our community was suddenly awash in methamphetamine.

I saw first hand the damage resulting from people using this drug. I knew we had to take action and we did. We began an aggressive campaign against methamphetamine and the people producing it. Some eighty meth labs later officers in my department can point to tremendous successes. We have been instrumental in the passage of state laws that provide enhanced punishment for meth producers; we have made many arrests that lead to our serious meth producers receiving sentences ranging from state probation to more than forty years in federal prison.



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It is now difficult to find a clear cut methamphetamine lab in our county. There are still a few in operation and we're closing in on those. We do find "dump sites" where lab related materials are illegally dumped but these too have declined. We have worked hard to deter people from manufacturing methamphetamine and to make it more difficult to get the necessary materials. We have worked to educate our citizens and we have developed relationships with our retailers. We established a three county meth task force dedicated to the investigation and seizure of meth labs and arresting those responsible for their operation. We are continually fighting the methamphetamine epidemic. Even with these efforts and the success we have had the use of methamphetamine is still prevalent in our area. We believe the majority of it is being brought in from the Western states and Mexico.

We are fighting a battle; working everyday to rid our County of methamphetamine and we are doing a good job; but we need help. We need laws passed controlling the sale of pseudoephedrine; the necessary ingredient for meth production. States such as Oklahoma have passed legislation making it very difficult for meth producers to purchase or steal large amounts of pseudoephedrine. Laws controlling the over the counter sale of pseudoephedrine have had a significant impact and have contributed to a substantial drop in methamphetamine production in the states passing them. North Carolina is considering similar laws but they have not adopted. The passage of federal legislation controlling sales of pseudoephedrine would have the single biggest impact on illicit methamphetamine producers.

One of the primary reasons for our successes are the partnerships we have been able to develop. Gretchen Shappert and Karen Marston of the Western District of North Carolina US Attorneys' Office, John Emerson and Walt Thrower from the DEA, Mark Triplett and David Schauble from the ATF, Van Shaw, Rick Hetzel, and David Call of the North Carolina State Bureau of Investigation, Charlie Byrd of the Watauga County District Attorneys' Office; these are names of some of the dozens of law enforcement officers and agents, and prosecutors who have come to our small County and worked with us, educated us, and stood beside us seizing labs and putting these criminals in prison.

Clandestine methamphetamine laboratories have moved east for some years now and have made it all the way across the Country. They are a local problem, a state problem, and now most of all, a national problem.

I anticipate that all of us in the room today will be discussing methamphetamine for some time to come.

Thank you for your time and service to the citizens of the United States of America.